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“You realize that it’s not always as it seems”: What Adults Learn about Management when Writing their own Management Cases

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Abstract: The purpose of this study was to understand student’s perceived learning outcomes in a program management course employing the seldom used process of “learner case writing” as a teaching-learning technique.

Experiential learning, cognitive scaffolding and narrative as a means to extend consciousness (Sheckly & Bell, 2006) serve as primary lenses for understanding our *learner case writing* technique (LCW). We frame the technique within the broad and amorphous arena of experiential learning. Implied in the constructivist model of experiential learning (Fenwick, 2000) is the capacity to narrate and reflect on one’s life experiences. LCW and related forms rely on learner narratives that seem to be unexamined except by Carter (1999) and Merrill (2004).

Case study is one of seven (Barrows, 1986) PBL approaches that could be arranged on a continuum of learner-centeredness. On one end of the continuum the learner is most active and the problem is least structured—action learning might be an example and on the opposite end might be the case study technique—a circumstance where the learner’s involvement is limited to analyzing the case, primarily a passive activity (Lohman, 2002). Learner case writing (LCW) falls somewhere near the middle.

Learner Case Writing Literature Review

Learner case writing is related but different from case study. Case study typically means that learners analyze a pre-written case; in case writing learners research and write about a critical management incident from their own work history or an incident in their own organization. We found three studies that researched LCW, two from undergraduate programs (56 teacher preparation students; a business school human relations course of 165 students). The third study described research with physicians in continuing medical education (CME). A similarity across the outcomes of the three studies’ was an increase in the learner’s ability to tie theory to practice. According to the researchers, pre-service teachers moved from “naïve generalizations to sophisticated, theory-based explanations” (Hammerness, Darling-Hammond & Shulman, 2002, p. 219) which the researchers attribute to numerous cognitive scaffolding techniques embedded in the course. Undergraduate business students also reported they were better able to apply course concepts as a result of the activity giving it a mean rating of 4.12 on a 5-point scale (Bailey, Sass, Swiercz, Seales and Kayes, 2005). Business students agreed that writing a case drawn from personal experience better enabled them to apply course concepts to “realistic situations” rating this item 4.24 (Bailey et al., 2005). Ryan and Marlow (2004) used learner generated cases with family and general practice physicians in CME. Their goal was to enhance learner engagement with content and also to reflect “the contextual nuances of individual and collective practices” (p. 117). Similar to Bailey et al. the physicians used their experience (professional practice) to collectively build a case during the program. Research findings indicated that reflective dialogue during the case building process was the primary benefit to attendees.

Cognitive scaffolding and coaching were not consistently cited as parts of the case writing activities described but it is clear that multiple drafts, peer-reading (Hammerness et al., 2002) and

instructor/content expert feedback (Hammerness et al., 2002 and Ryan & Marlow, 2004) were central supports. Each LCW activity described here makes constructivist assumptions about the nature of learning from experience in other words that adult learners can, to a certain extent, objectify their experience.

Method

The epistemological undergirding for this study is constructionism—the belief that students construct their learning through engagement with the learning environment. Therefore, we took a phenomenological approach in order to study the student’s subjective learning experiences through the case writing activity.

All participants in the study were graduate students enrolled in an adult education master’s program management course taught during the spring and summer 2008 semesters. Seventeen students participated in our study. Electronic student journal submissions and student responses to online discussion board questions were recorded/collected through the university’s Blackboard system throughout the semester. At the end of the semester, students were asked to provide process feedback and to participate in group and individual interview conducted by the researchers to capture students’ overall perceptions of the case writing process as well as case-based learning. Researchers independently reviewed student journals, discussion board entries, and transcripts of group and individual interviews for reoccurring themes and identified the key themes that emerged from the data collected. Finally, researchers developed a matrix containing major themes and excerpts from journal entries and interviews to manage the data collected and assess how frequently themes occurred.

Learner Case Writing Process and Findings

The process we used for LCW is described in the following table.

LCW Process	
Steps	Student Actions
Case Story (Maslin-Ostrowski & Ackerman in Galbraith, 1998)	Wrote a short story about a management dilemma student experienced or observed
Case Analysis	Reviewed, analyzed and received feedback on a pre-written case.
Modification of Rubric	Reviewed and suggested revisions to the rubric
Field Research	Based on guidelines in the syllabus, outlined their case story, developed interview questions for relevant parties, requested permission to conduct the research.
Case Construction	Constructing their own case by synthesizing case story, field research, feedback and rubric
Guiding Questions/Prompts	Instructor feedback focuses learners on course concepts and prompts them to consider organization of their case.
Feedback	During data collection students submitted drafts of their case for peer and instructor feedback.
Case Study Presentation	Synthesized course concepts across cases.

Figure 1. Learner Case Writing Process

Having participated in the LCW process students have consistently projected an increased ability to be reflective about management issues. For example one states: “I learned to dissect the case and think about it from the outside looking in.” And another, “As you do this case ...throughout the day or throughout the week...it kind of helps you think about what your next step might be...

.” And finally, “I realized that the [manager] I wrote about ... how he might have felt and his perspective on the whole ordeal.” Revisiting a real workplace issue to which the student either was a part or personally observed allows them during their field interviews to listen to key parties reflect on the management decisions they made and how they might have handled it differently.

This opportunity to listen to the reflections of others seems to aid our students in appreciating the value of reflection because they can see how often their initial impression of the incident was very different from the perspective they were now privy to. The most exciting finding is that the LCW seems, in some instances, to operate similar to action research and has resulted in long-term outcomes. For example, in one instance the student’s field interviews conducted resulted in a campus committee being established with our student as chair to further examine the problem and to seek potential solutions.

Reflection on past experience pointed some learners towards revised understanding of self. Several of our learners commented about increased self-awareness that they linked to the LCW. For example, one student who even though he struggled with course concepts said that he “learned how to get feedback from my environment.” Another student indicated that as she interviewed and synthesized her LCW assignment she was able to analyze what aspects of her work she did and did not like and could use that going forward to her next position.

LCW is inherently a reflective process but reflection as a theme was more pronounced in the spring face-to-face course than in the summer online course. On a slightly different note, it was surprising how often students in both semesters noted the usefulness of claims, grounds and warrant as analytical tools when considering management choices. We have strongest evidence for the transferral of this tool than any other concept in the course. Here is a sample: ... “I tried to, basically attempt to make a change in some of the programs and one of them has been used now and its working. ... And, we sat down and actually wrote what would be the risk, claims, grounds and warrants and discussed them and decided what would be the best motive to attempt to try and go forward with it” (RI, 24:10).

Overall themes based on student’s case writing seem to be positive. Students indicate that the case writing provides rich context for the management concepts we teach in our program management course. Further, the students appear to be transferring important management skills back to their workplace.

Discussion

Because learners research familiar management dilemmas they have the opportunity to gain multiple perspectives on an issue that they thought they understood. This provides an element of cognitive dissonance that draws the learner’s attention to the importance of multiple perspectives. The act of management is one that requires the manager to take on varying roles and perspectives in order to succeed. The LCW activity seems to provide students with that opportunity to see in more than one way and as we heard above in the student’s voices this was beneficial to them on a professional level, as managers or prospective managers, as well as on the personal level. An unexpected outcome was that students found the activity revealing on a personal level. For example, the student who said he “learned how to get feedback from his environment” was locked in a bitter battle with his principal concerning military leave. After conducting interviews he realized the considerable constraints the principal operated under in trying to locate a replacement for him. He gained greater insight about the delicate balance managers/principals have to set between meeting client needs (parents and students) and meeting employee needs. So when he said he learned how to get feedback he means he now knows not to assume he understands the management perspective, not to immediately make a management dilemma a personal issue but to ask questions.

Among all of the concepts addressed in the course the concept most prominent for students was that of claims, grounds, and warrant (Quinn, Faerman, Thompson, McGrath, 2007) which is presented in the course as ways to frame and analyze an argument. It was a concept students seem to find immediately useful and it was a frequent theme within our data. And although this theme presents a clear indication that some students were able to transfer course concepts to their work fewer students were able to make linkages between management concepts and program management in adult education.

Scaffolding is important in LCW especially because of the widespread response from students that engaging in any type of case study activity was a first time experience for them. They identified the helpfulness of reading and analyzing a case study before writing one as a key support in the process. Reviewing and providing feedback on or, as one class did, constructing the case writing rubric was also identified as helpful.

In closing this discussion we want to draw in the value of personal narrative and its relationship to the change of body state (COBS) that Sheckley and Bell (2006) describe when explaining the neuroscience of the brain. The authors posit that the feelings and sensations that change the state of the body become part of the neural path that can form durable neural circuits aiding us to remember the experience (p.43). In the field of adult education it is conventional wisdom that learning is enhanced when we move from the known to the unknown and these authors provide neurological support for this learning strategy. They explain that new concepts will adhere best to prior change of body state experiences. Our LCW process seems to parallel strategies Sheckley and Bell suggest. Their Strategy One is to begin with the baseline of prior experience. On the first night of class we ask students to write their case story based on a management dilemma they have experienced. Strategy Two is to extend learner's consciousness. In this step the adult educator's goal is to help the student "to remove the blinders of their prior experiences" (p.48) which we accomplish when students are exposed in the course to various management strategies and ways of framing problems. Strategy Three: enriching consciousness entails choosing experiences that "have a high probability for prompting COBS episodes" (p. 49). We have students conduct field research on a "live" management dilemma where one goal is for them to show how course concepts inform their case.

Implications

Case writing uses real life situations and requires active participation of adult learners and thus seems a beneficial addition to the education of adults. And like Ryan and Marlow (2004) we found that students believe it promotes reflection on practice. The effectiveness of this activity in our courses suggests that case writing is a worthwhile activity for adult education students because it provides needed context to the learning of management skills and grounds abstract management concepts in a workplace environment familiar to students. However, we also find that a good deal of scaffolding is required to assist the students in creating their own case.

Based on this, implications for practice are that LCW has a significant place in the adult education classroom but that a variety of supports are required to assist the students to learn how to create their own case. We suggest the following: assessment rubric for creating a case, doing a case study analysis early in the course so that students read a professionally written case, outline the steps to conducting the required field research and provide several opportunities for faculty and peer feedback.

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